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SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE: STUDENT UNION RAID HEADQUARTERS OF
HUMAN RIGHTS NGOS

REF: ABIDJAN 539

Classified By: Poloff Laura Taylor-Kale for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: On Monday, May 21 a mob of more than 200 youth from the Federation of Secondary and University Students of Cote d'Ivoire (FESCI) concurrently attacked the offices of two prominent Ivoirian human rights NGOs, the Ivoirian League for Human Rights (LIDHO) and the Association for the Protection of Human Rights (APDH) and looted or destroyed hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of office supplies and furniture, computers equipment and documents. Police were at the scene at LIDHO during the raid but failed to stop it or to make any arrests. The attacks were linked to the university teachers' strike which has shut down public universities and prompted FESCI to close down private universities in retaliation (reftel). In a meeting with Emboffs, FESCI leader Serge Koffi denied any FESCI involvement in the raids but noted that students are angry at both organizations for supporting the teachers' strike. FESCI has succeeded in closing most private universities through its fear campaign and Serge Koffi has publicly threatened the striking teachers. This latest upsurge in FESCI violence is troubling and a timely reminder that the government will have to address the role of marginal, but violent actors such as FESCI in the peace and reconciliation process. END SUMMARY

12. (C) Late morning May 21, a mob of FESCI youth in what appear to be coordinated attacks, looted and virtually destroyed the offices of two prominent Ivoirian human rights organizations, LIDHO and APDH. Poloff visited LIDHO headquarters on Tuesday, May 22 to see the destruction firsthand. LIDHO told Poloff that after holding an on-campus rally not far from their office, about 250 FESCI members descended on LIDHO's headquarters. Over a two-hour period, the mob blocked the building compound while fifteen FESCI members ransacked the building, stealing money and hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of computer equipment, air conditioners and water heaters, office equipment and furniture, and documents. Poloff found the floor covered with glass, toppled and broken bookshelves, tables and chairs. According to LIDHO officials, many of whom witnessed the raid themselves, four police officers, including the local constable, arrived on the scene while FESCI was looting the office. However, the police did not attempt to stop the attack or to make any arrests. Security forces have also failed to question or detained anyone in connection with either attack.

13. (C) FESCI has publicly denounced LIDHO for hosting a May 17 press conference for the university teachers' union, CNEC, at its headquarters and LIDHO's and APDH's declarations in support of the teachers' right to strike. FESCI leader Serge Koffi publicly threatened the striking teachers last week. Emboffs met with Koffi on May 23. Koffi denied

responsibility for the May 21 events. He also expressed no regrets, commenting that "There needs to be an investigation to see if it was really students who vandalized their offices. If they were actually students, then they were students discontented with the position that LIDHO and APDH have taken (in support of the teachers' strike) over the students' right to education." (See reftel.) He vigorously denounced LIDHO and APDH for adopting an "anti-student position." According to Koffi, LIDHO has no credibility in the students' eyes as a human rights organization.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: FESCI's actions and the atmosphere of impunity surrounding them are troubling. FESCI is a thoroughly thuggish organization and police are reluctant to take them on for fear of being targeted themselves. Some FESCI "students" are no longer in school, having dropped out or completed their studies, and are unemployed. Despite the close connections between FESCI and the ruling FPI party (FESCI was nurtured by the FPI during Bedie's presidency and many FPI stalwarts are former FESCI members), it is not clear that even President Gbagbo has full control over them. FESCI had been relatively quiet in recent months despite the long-running university teachers' strike. The latest upsurge in violence may reflect the group's desire to assert itself in the face of perceived neglect after the signing of the Ouagadougou accord. It is, in any case, a timely reminder that the government will have to address the role of marginal, but violent actors such as FESCI in the peace and reconciliation process.

HOOKS